

A New Era for Experts

Communicating health messages in a post-pandemic world.

> Overview

More than six months into the coronavirus pandemic and it looks like the disruption and uncertainty caused by the outbreak is set to continue. With a sharpened focus on public health, healthcare brands in particular have had to rethink the way they communicate and connect with their key audiences, in what continue to be socially and economically challenging times.

Within this context it has become even more vital that health messages and campaigns strike the right tone, and above all, demonstrate a brand's value and trustworthiness to customers, stakeholders and the general public. So, in this ever-evolving landscape (in a nation that had 'had enough of experts' just a few years ago)¹, how can healthcare brands communicate their health messages effectively?

To find out, we conducted research using publically available sources of information, such as national surveys, academic research and media coverage, to explore how our habits have changed throughout the course of the pandemic.

We also commissioned a poll of 500 UK consumers, to understand which sources people are most likely to turn to for trusted health information, as well as the factors that impact their trust in these sources. Finally, we conducted a number of qualitative interviews with healthcare professionals (HCPs), which highlighted a clear gap when it comes to reliable and publically accessible health information – a gap that healthcare brands could help to fill.

> Changing consumer habits

Broadly speaking, the pandemic has driven an increase in time spent online and people's appetite for health-related advice and stories, particularly with regards to coronavirus. For instance, the UK's communications regulator found that 99% of 2,000 UK adults were accessing news about COVID-19 at least once a day at the start of lockdown (27-29 March). By August, although this rate had fallen, more than eight in ten (83%) continued to seek out COVID-related news at least once a day.²

As a recent report notes, consumers have become "a more captive audience", with 80% of the UK population admitting they are consuming more content as a result of the outbreak.³ The pandemic has also accelerated another existing trend – a desire for more immediate access to health information, often via digital sources. This shift in how we access health information is well documented and has also been observed by HCPs. When asked where patients are now most likely to turn for general health advice, one doctor we spoke with stated: "Undoubtedly Google"⁴, while NHS GP, Dr Sonal Shah (@livingwellgp), further explained that "more and more patients turn to Dr Google, or social media for answers"⁵.

For healthcare brands, this presents an opportunity to communicate their health messages to an audience that is more willing and receptive than ever before. However, with the rising appetite for health information (and well-known threat of health misinformation), how much do we actually trust the health content we're consuming?

¹ Michael Gove interview with Faisal Islam, Sky News, June 3

² Ofcom, Covid-19 news and information: consumption and attitudes, September 2020

³ GlobalWebIndex, Contingency planning: where should brands be moving their ad spend?, April 2020

⁴ Interview with speciality registrar in a busy district general hospital, September 2020

⁵ Interview with Sonal Shah, NHS GP, September 2020

> Trust in health information: key findings

Trust in health experts is growing

Although, according to politicians, the UK public was sick of experts just a few years ago, research suggests that public trust in scientists and health experts has grown during the pandemic. In fact, a recent poll found that 64% of UK voters are now more likely to listen to expert advice from qualified scientists and researchers⁶.

Additionally, according to the most recent Ipsos Veracity Index, the top three most trusted professions are all within the healthcare industry: nurses, pharmacists and doctors were trusted by at least 95% of people.⁷ Of the HCPs we spoke with, nearly all felt that patients trusted them more now than pre-pandemic, with only one commenting that trust levels were the same as before the crisis.

This heightened trust in experts is also reflected in the views from our own poll of UK consumers. When asked what would make them most likely to lose trust in a source of health information, 70% of respondents said they would lose trust if it didn't come from a qualified HCP. Similarly, when asked which sources they would rely on most for trustworthy health information in the event of second national lockdown, respondents overwhelmingly indicated they would turn to HCPs or official health organisations, such as the NHS.⁸

Trust levels have increased. There is a greater recognition of the effort the NHS and the medical profession have taken to deal with this pandemic, in spite of the illness and deaths of some UK health professionals who contracted COVID in the workplace.

Speciality registrar in a busy district general hospital

I often feel overwhelmed with the amount of trust that patients put in us. I think doctors are very lucky to be in such a trusted profession, but it is quite a responsibility to ensure that you give the correct advice.

Junior doctor working in trauma and orthopaedics unit

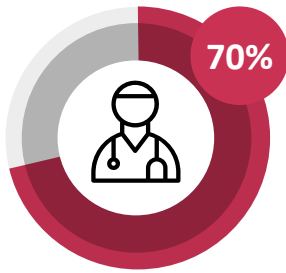
Expert perspectives on health information

⁶ The Guardian, Trust in scientists grows as fake coronavirus news rises, UK poll finds, May 2020

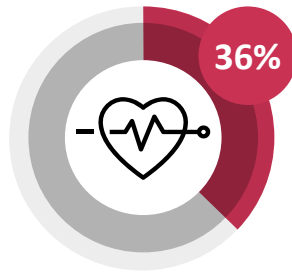
⁷ Ipsos MRBI Omnipoll, Veracity Index 2020 - Who Do We Trust The Most?, May 2020

⁸ OnePulse poll of 500 UK consumers, September 2020

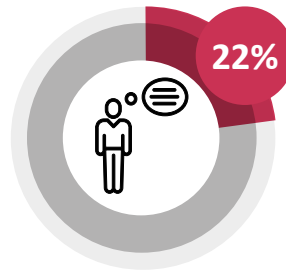
Which of the following reasons would make you LOSE trust in a source of health information?



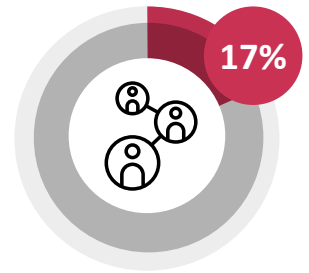
Doesn't come from a qualified healthcare professional



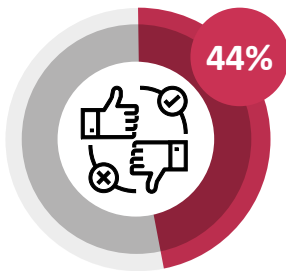
Doesn't come from someone with personal experience of a particular health issue



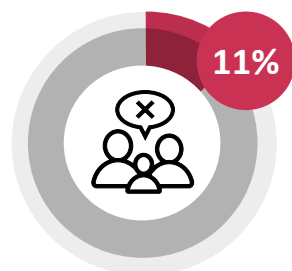
Conflicts with what I believe



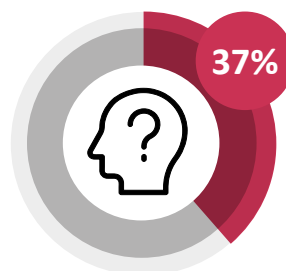
Doesn't come from someone I can relate to



Source has gone against official advice

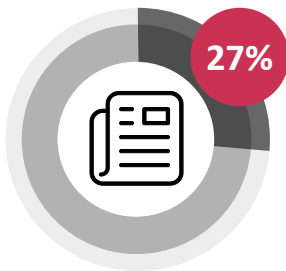


My friends or family tell me not to trust it

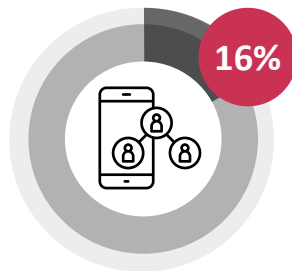


It is too confusing or vague

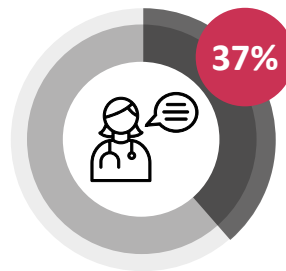
If the UK experienced a second wave of COVID-19 and entered another national lockdown, which of the following would you rely on most to provide you with trustworthy health information?



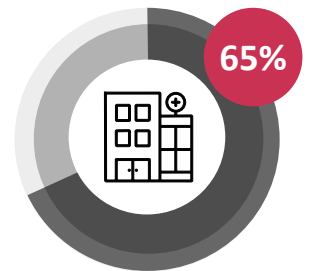
Mainstream news media (TV; print or online)



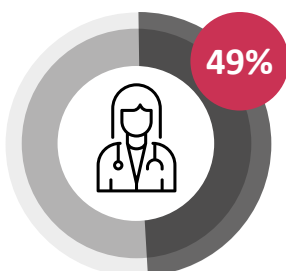
Social media (e.g. Facebook or Twitter)



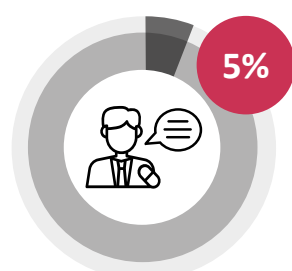
Conversations with my GP/doctor/nurse



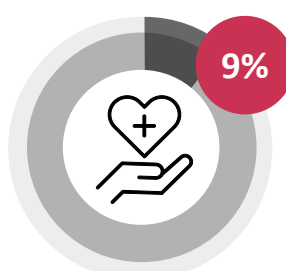
Official UK healthcare organisations (e.g. NHS)



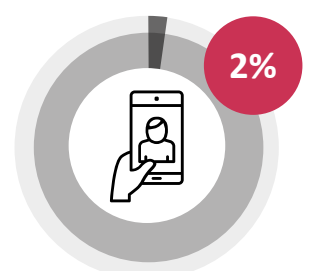
Scientists or academic experts



Conversations with pharmacists



Healthcare charities (e.g. British Lung Foundation; Asthma UK)



Celebrities or social media influencers

The rise of the relatable expert

While trust in HCPs was visibly high, a third (36%) of our respondents said they wouldn't trust health information if it didn't come from someone with personal experience of a particular health issue. Close to a fifth (17%) also said they would lose trust in a source of health information if it didn't come from someone they could personally relate to.⁹

The importance of relatability is something we have also observed in our work with clients in healthcare, pharma and other sectors. When it comes to influencer marketing for example, we have observed a 'reset' in the influencer landscape during the pandemic. Consumers are increasingly seeking out content from familiar, trusted faces who have expertise and specialist knowledge. This underscores why influencers such as Joe Wicks, whose 'PE with Joe' videos provided practical and relatable health content for followers during a challenging period, have fared so well during the pandemic.

How clearly people can understand information from experts and other sources is also critical, particularly when it comes to information related to our health. Over a third of the respondents (37%) in our survey indicated they would lose trust in a source if the health information they provided was too confusing or vague.¹⁰ So while the source is important (are they credible? Do they have relevant expertise?), the ability to deliver health messages in a relatable and understandable way is also key to ensure engagement.

Media matters

When it comes to the channels used to amplify health messages, trust in traditional media has at times waned¹¹ during the outbreak. Most sources agree, however, that trust in broadcast media has increased. For example, data reported in The Guardian noted that broadcasters, led by the BBC, were the most trusted source of news during the crisis.¹²

Our own research also suggests that trust in and the use of channels (particularly social media) varies notably depending on audience age. Around a quarter of 16-17 year olds (27%) and 18-20 year olds (24%) that we surveyed indicated that social media would be their main source of trustworthy health information if the UK experiences a second national lockdown – compared with just 16% of respondents overall.

In contrast, our poll showed that mainstream news media is seen as more trustworthy in this context by those over the age of 21, with those aged 35-44 trusting it most. Respondents over the age of 45 were more likely to rely on healthcare charities as trusted sources of health information.

Brands must consider the use of media channels carefully – particularly when catering to a marginalized or hard to reach demographic. Dr Sonal Shah noted that “in communities that don't read mainstream newspapers or TV, the messages that are being shared on social media or WhatsApp are often clinically completely wrong.” Thinking about how best to adapt or tailor communications and how to reach these audiences is key to ensuring that accurate and reliable health messages are heard over the din of health misinformation.

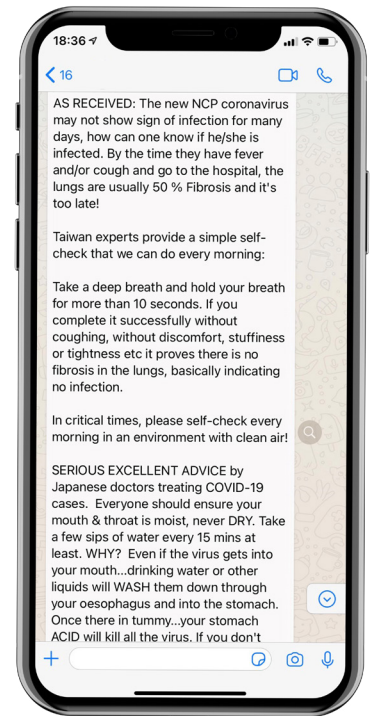
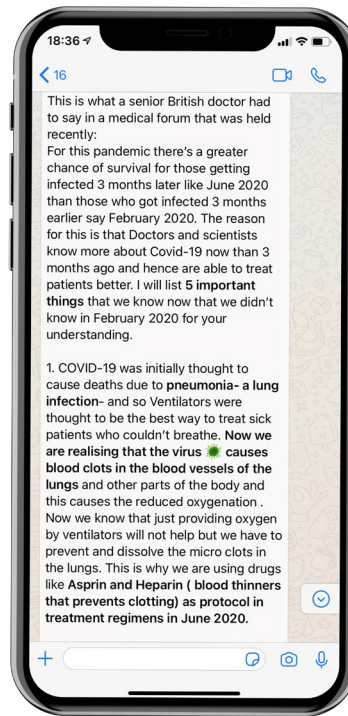
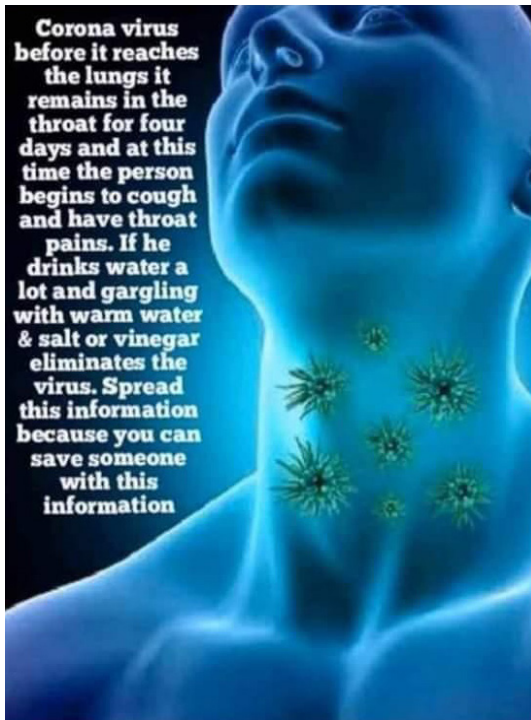
⁹ OnePulse poll of 500 UK consumers, September 2020

¹⁰ OnePulse poll of 500 UK consumers, September 2020

¹¹ YouGov, Consumers say the COVID-19 crisis is improving – but trust in Government and the media is declining, July 2020

¹² The Guardian, Coronavirus sparks debate over trust in media despite record audience figures, May 2020

Examples of health information recently shared via WhatsApp:



> The role of brands in communicating health messages

In the current climate, healthcare brands should play a key role in ensuring that health-related content is not only accessible, but also accurate. One of the HCPs we spoke with highlighted that, in some cases, when patients do not trust the information and advice provided by their HCP, this is often because they aren't provided with enough information to meet their expectations.¹³ This indicates a gap that healthcare brands could help to fill.

Another theme that emerged strongly from our conversations with HCPs was patients' desire to play a role in their own health and do their own research into the health issues that affect them. This presents another opportunity for healthcare brands, who should help to empower patients who seek out health information by making sure this is visible and available from a reliable source.

¹³ Interview with Consultant in a busy district general hospital, September 2020

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I find it particularly useful when there is a synergy between healthcare professional advice and reliable online information, as it is more empowering for patients. For example, I actively encourage patients with inflammatory bowel disease to read more about the immunosuppressant medication I have prescribed to them on the “Crohn’s & Colitis UK” website, and come back to me if they have any additional questions.

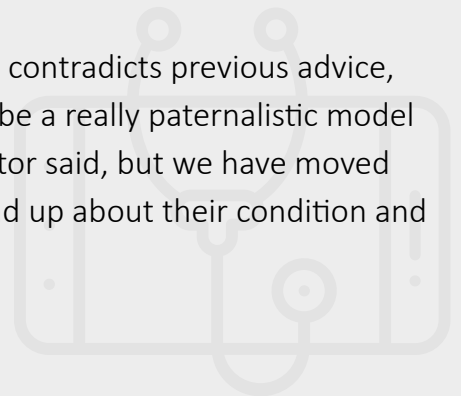
Speciality registrar in a busy district general hospital



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I have found generally that once you say one thing that contradicts previous advice, you immediately lose the patient’s trust. There used to be a really paternalistic model in medicine where patients would do whatever the doctor said, but we have moved towards shared decision making now. Most patients read up about their condition and treatment on Google.

Junior doctor working in trauma and orthopaedics unit



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A lot of misinformation comes from social media and Dr Google. The rise in online forums is a particular concern for me. It worries me that people would rather take advice from a stranger than from a medical professional.

Dr Sonal Shah, NHS GP



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The majority of patients still largely use Google, as it’s at your fingertips. Accessing professional advice is still so difficult sadly. People would rather speak to a health professional, which is why so many attend A&E unnecessarily, but if you are using the systems and services correctly, obtaining professional advice takes time and patience.

Paediatric community nurse



> Key recommendations for healthcare communicators



1 As a nation, we're back in love with experts – but we have become more selective about which experts we trust – so choose experts you work with carefully

- People want relatability and clarity from their experts. Brands may need to think outside the box when it comes to who the 'relatable expert' is for their audience and what impact they want their messages to have.
- Taking a more inclusive approach to expertise, thinking outside 'the usual suspects' may help brands to identify partners with a broader range of relevant knowledge and experience.



2 Aim to empower with knowledge

- There is a clear opportunity for healthcare brands to play a role in empowering patients, as they strive to play a more active role in their own health.
- Ensure patients and consumers can readily access reliable information online: don't let the gaps be filled by online forums, WhatsApp and other unreliable sources.



3 Appeal to the 'gut reaction' as well as the 'rational reaction', to ensure healthcare messages are fully embraced

- Audiences may reject content and messages that feel 'off', even if they make logical sense. When presented with a rational but nuanced or complicated message, people may have a 'gut reaction' that overwrites the 'rational reaction' the message was intended to provoke.
- Remember, it's not only the source that matters but also their ability to deliver messages clearly, consistently and simply to appeal to people's 'gut' as well as their head.



4 Partner with HCPs in a way that encourages mutual support

- Trust in HCPs is at an all-time high, making them a major asset in any communications strategy. However, healthcare brands must also recognise the responsibility they have to support HCPs, particularly when patients need more information than their GP can realistically provide.



5 Remember the media is as important as the message

- Trust in and use of traditional and social media can vary widely depending on your audience demographics.
- It is vital to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to the channels used to amplify health messages, particularly for harder to reach audiences.

